

CARICATURES OF MEN OF SCIENCE

by E. C. WATSON

LIKE A GOOD MANY OTHER Victorian men of science, George Biddell Airy (1801-1892), eminent British astronomer, did outstanding work in several fields. Particularly in his younger years, his contributions to mathematics and physics were as impressive as those in astronomy. His work on the theory of light, which in 1831 won him the Copley medal of the Royal Society, and his researches on the mean density of the earth were especially noteworthy.

The *Vanity Fair* caricature of Airy which is reproduced on this page appeared in the magazine on November 13, 1875, accompanied by the following account:

"We have among us in the various departments of Science some truly great men whose names will live in their work to many future ages; and of these is Sir George Airy. Born in Northumberland four-and-seventy years ago with a splendid intellect but to no inheritance, he has made of himself, by an unremitting course of labour of the most trying kind, what he is—one of the glories of his country.

"Not without difficulty he succeeded at eighteen in entering Trinity College, Cambridge. He came out Senior Wrangler, was elected Lucasian Professor at twenty-five, and at once proceeded to deliver a most remarkable series of lectures on Experimental Philosophy, in which he fully developed for the first time the undulatory theory of Light.

"At twenty-seven he was elected Plumian Professor, and now he took charge of the Cambridge Observatory, and devoted himself with all his rare powers to astronomy. The best mathematician of his time, and with a natural turn besides for the more delicate forms of mechanics, he at once began to revolutionize all the astronomical calculations, and to perfect the observations by adapting to them every modern resource of the mechanical arts; and at thirty-four he was taken into official recognition by receiving in the post of Astronomer-Royal one of those few appointments which must even in these times be given solely for ability and aptitude.

"In this capacity he has served the State and the Science like the enthusiast that he is, nor could there be



Sir George Biddell Airy

named a man who has done so much and such wearing work as he. He superintends the compilation of the Nautical Almanack, he is appealed to on all questions of boundary, he rates chronometers, and corrects compasses, and withal he finds time to organise expeditions, to start new theories in optics, and to contribute many papers to the public press.

"A sober, steady man, with an immense capacity for and delight in labour, his life has been spent where his work lies, on Greenwich Hill, and he is little known to Society; yet he is still young, he knows almost everything, and his accomplishments and simplicity render him the most charming of companions. It is remarkable proof of the estimation in which men of the highest worth are held in England, that at seventy Sir George was made a Companion and at two-and-seventy a Knight Commander of the Bath. Perhaps some day, when he has performed as great service to his country as Prince Leiningen and Sir John Pakington, he will be admitted with them to the honour of the Grand Cross, which will nevertheless make him no greater a man than he is."

One of a series of articles devoted to reproductions of prints, drawings and paintings of interest in the history of science—drawn from the famous collection of E. C. Watson, Professor of Physics and Dean of the Faculty at the California Institute.